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Understanding Organizational Behavior. by Chris Argyris

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a portion of the sample dramatize findings from the questionnaires.

The research traces the effects of various kinds of role perception and conflict, related to executives' status *vis a vis* their teachers and communities, on executives' leadership attitudes, leadership behavior, and teachers' ratings of their leadership ability. There is also some analysis of the ways in which executives resolve, or fail to resolve, different types of role conflict. The general topic reminds one of the work on school superintendents by Gross, Mason, and McEachern, but Seeman uses different variables and defines key terms differently so that his study and theirs, while both valuable, are not comparable or cumulative with each other.

Executives were similar to teachers in their descriptions of ideal leadership behavior; both groups tended to prefer that executives be democratic in decision-making procedures but remain aloof from teachers in purely personal and "social" matters. Executives, however, were somewhat more democratic than teachers in describing ideal executive behavior, a finding which Seeman attributes to "leadership guilt" stemming from the need to exercise authority in a democratic society. Executives who were either very high or very low in "ambivalence" (defined as the tendency to say "very hard" when asked how hard it was to make certain decisions) were generally rated as poor leaders by their subordinates; this is tentatively interpreted to mean that the non-ambivalent executives were blind to the inevitable role conflicts of the situation, the highly ambivalent executives were incapacitated by unresolved conflict, and executives of medium ambivalence were the most "realistic." This interpretation fits with other findings supporting the general idea that the "realist" was the best administrator. The realist perceived his role conflict but could cope with it; he was high in rate of vertical communication and in willingness to change his behavior; he was low in social distance maintenance and in domination of subordinates despite being high in the amount of community status superiority he *felt* over his subordinates; and he was given a high effectiveness rating by his subordinates.

These findings illustrate but do not fully summarize the kinds of analysis that were undertaken. The research is hard to summarize and, in fact, it is sometimes hard to follow, because so many variables, scales, and hypotheses are introduced that one cannot always keep track of them all. This problem is confounded by the fact that not many of the initial hypotheses panned out, few of the relationships found were very strong, and many of the interpretations were developed ad hoc, to salvage something from unexpected findings. As a result, the work has somewhat the quality of a fishing expedition in which the investigator knows where the fish are biting but lacks a theory to tell him what kinds of fish to expect. Seeman tries to move toward a more theoretical level in a concluding chapter on "some emerging theses on leadership," but without much success, in this reviewer's opinion. Some of the "theses" are a bit vague and global—e.g., the leader's position is a difficult one in a society where leaders are expected to be strong but cannot be autocratic. Others are trite: social position influences ideology. Still others involve attaching

names to things in an effort to extrapolate far beyond the data: leaders are apt to be "alienated" and act "inauthentically."

This is not entirely Seeman's fault, since he is operating in a rather ill-defined area in which he has to invent his own theory. There are about as many ideas of what makes for good leadership as there are writers on leadership, and nothing resembling an acceptable systematic theory has yet emerged. Seeman does not give us one, but he does give some significant findings and some ingenious interpretations which can help his successors to plan further research. The variables he has dealt with are basic, and they are sociological. He has presented his findings with scientific caution. Appendices give a full description of the research procedures including all the questions used to form the various scales.

The publisher is to be commended for making a sturdily constructed book with an attractive format, yet keeping the price down.

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UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR. By Chris Argyris. Homewood, Illinois: The Dorsey Press, 1960. 179 pp. \$6.65.

This book is a substantial contribution to the literature in an area where maturity has frequently failed to keep pace with sheer growth. Industrial sociology today is seen by some as having no less than five basic theoretical approaches "sufficiently distinct to be separable as pegs on which to hang empirical research." (E. William Noland, "Industrial Sociology and the Businessman," *Social Forces*, XXXIX [October 1960], 5-18, referring to Robert Dubin, "Human Relations in Formal Organizations," *Review of Educational Research*, XXIX [October 1959], 347-59.) One of these pegs is that having to do with the "individual psyche versus organization needs" orientation, with which Argyris is appropriately associated. Those who read *Understanding Organizational Behavior*, however, will find it more difficult to find a single peg. Personality, to be sure, is still a basic factor in the Argyris approach, but sociologists will be pleased to find that proportionately more space and importance is given to the organization as a social system. Furthermore, this volume makes it clear that the relationship between the individual and organization is not necessarily always characterized by conflict.

Argyris claims that "... the objective of this book has been to outline in somewhat systematic detail the methodological specifics and the theoretical underpinnings of one approach to the study of human behavior in organizations" (italics his). But it appears that he has expanded this "one" approach to include no less than two levels of sociological analysis. Our units of analysis may be individual attributes, the individual in social context or the social or structural level where the group itself is the unit of analysis. Perhaps the nature of our discipline as most of us see it is such as to make us happiest when analysis is sophisticatedly performed at the third level; the second is usually acceptable.

The author's 1957 publication, *Personality and Organization*, emphasized the "needs" of a "healthy" personality and the "needs" of the formal organization, and then proceeded to explain how they got in the way of one another. The result he saw as adaptive behavior by employees, and management reactions. *Understanding Organizational Behavior* takes up where *Personality and Organization* left off. The basic propositions set forth in the 1957 publication are repeated in the first chapter of this 1960 work, to be sure, but we are called on to take a closer look at the *organization* (italics mine). But Argyris describes organization in terms recognizably different from those of Weber, Barnard, and their disciples. Argyris' *organization* is a plurality of parts achieving specific objectives and maintaining themselves through their interrelatedness. In these achievement and self-maintenance tasks they adapt to the external environment, such adaptation reinforcing the interrelatedness of parts. The organization is seen as a true social *system*: the concepts of structure and function are just as applicable at the organizational level as at the societal level. The system has "intake," "output," and "equilibrium." Intake activities are found in the personnel department, whose primary function is "to make certain that only those employees enter the system who will not upset it." This not only assures organizational equilibrium but prevents individual dissatisfactions. Thus, the conflict emphasized in Argyris' earlier works is at the outset given a less dominant position.

These intake activities are among the basic elements of a model of the "system" (based on Plant X) that attempts to organize the content known about formal organization, leadership, managerial controls and human controls. Plant X has two subsystems—one highly skilled, the other offering nonchallenging work. Thus the formal requirements of the two systems differ and the employees in the two systems also differ significantly in their "predispositions." An informal employee culture exists in each system serving as a subsystem to guarantee that the individual needs are maintained. Top management is willing to reinforce the norms of this subsystem, providing a state of "mutual satisfaction." The only "unhappy" people are the foremen, who because of "psychological work contract," have simple jobs which do not satisfy their "predispositions." This can be predicted from the model.

The model for X is then applied to another plant—Y. Plants X and Y, both parts of the same corporation, are for the most part similar except that Plant Y is experiencing a "tightening up" process through the increased use of new managerial controls. Thus, on the basis of the Plant X model and knowledge of the "tightening up" process going on in Plant Y, Argyris formulated 15 *a priori* hypotheses to be tested. A typical one was: "Employees in Plant Y will decrease their emphasis on quality work." Twelve of the hypotheses were supported directly by the data, two were indirectly supported, while one was rejected.

By this time it should be clear that most of the author's data are concerned with the individual in social context (the intermediate level of analysis); however, his new concern with system theory has enabled him to bridge the gap in places between the second

and third levels. His 1957 publication did not reach this third level. Even more encouraging, however, is a discussion indicating "the direction in which the writer is going at the present time." He shows new concern with third-level problems as the degree of disturbance that any part can experience without influencing its relationship with the other parts and the whole. On the other hand, it should not be inferred that the author's increased concern with the system has come about at the expense of his interest in the individual personality. This is certainly not the case, for, indeed, the postulates set forth in *Personality and Organization* are basic building blocks, used, along with system theory, in constructing the model set forth in *Understanding Organizational Behavior*. Just as the sociologist is somewhat dissatisfied with his colleagues who attempt to explain social phenomena on the basis of psychological theory, the psychologist, in turn, is similarly dissatisfied with his colleagues when they appear to venture afield and distort their own specialty. Both, as behavioral scientists, must recognize that perhaps the most inclusive theories will be those that incorporate both types of variables, an undertaking which Argyris has attempted with substantial success. While Argyris' theoretical handling of the personality system and social system substantially overlap that of Parsons, he has quite imaginatively and rigorously applied his conceptual scheme to two empirical situations.

This brings us to a second basic merit of *Understanding Organizational Behavior*. The author's methods, including research strategy, the interview, internal validity checks and analysis of data, are all purposely made quite explicit. Indeed, one of the author's main purposes was to describe concretely how to conduct research in organizations. Little need be said here except that his description is thorough in regard to his own approach, which, he points out, is not the only one.

It is due to the author's excellent organization, formalization of hypotheses and propositions, and general ability to write clearly and concisely that such a thin (179 pages) publication manages to be an adequate discussion of the methods, theory, and general findings of the investigations.

Despite its freshness of approach and numerous contributions, this book would have its limitations as a text (a suggestion, of course, of the publisher). In the first place, it does not provide the breadth and coverage of materials required of a one-semester text. Furthermore, although Argyris has handled his own approach in substantial detail, it leaves the student with little knowledge of traditional organization theory. Finally, the subject matter of industrial sociology is frequently described as "man in organization in environment." This book is concerned only with man in organization.

*Understanding Organizational Behavior* could be profitably used as a supplementary text (also a suggestion of the publisher). Not only does it give the reader a thorough understanding of the study of man in organization, but it immediately suppresses the standard undergraduate complaints that our discipline is (1) too general, and (2) impracticable.

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